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Introduction: Rethinking “One China”

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THIS BOOK IS THE RESULT OF A FEBRUARY 26, 2004, HERITAGE Foundation symposium, “Rethinking ‘One China,’” which addressed the “one China” dilemma in American foreign policy. Symposium panelists included two of America’s most respected China scholars (Arthur Waldron of the University of Pennsylvania and Ross Terrill of Harvard); two thoughtful strategic thinkers (Thomas Donnelly of the American Enterprise Institute and William Kristol of the Project for the New American Century); and myself. A last-minute emergency prevented Bill Kristol from speaking on his panel, but his thoughts are encapsulated in a paper that he presented at a congressional hearing on April 21, 2004, and which is included in this volume.

Also participating in the symposium project and discussions were five members of the U.S. House of Representatives: the two co-chairmen of the Congressional Taiwan Caucus, Representatives Steve Chabot (R–OH) and Dana Rohrabacher (R–CA), and Representatives Peter Deutsch (D–FL), Joseph M. Hoeffel (D–PA), and Robert E. Andrews (D–NJ). Additional remarks on the “One China” issue by Representatives Andrews and Chabot, delivered in September 2003 and published as a Heritage Foundation *Lecture*, add extra dimensions to the debate and are included in this volume as well.

The unifying theme of these chapters is the risk inherent in basing a foreign policy on myth, because "One China" is one of the true-blue myths of late 20th century diplomacy. The contributors look at the reality: Two separate countries now face each other across the Taiwan Strait. One is the emerging Chinese superpower on the Asian mainland, and the other is the young Taiwanese democracy in the island rim of the Western Pacific. Whereas these two lands are increasingly entwined in the trade, banking, and economic networks that interconnect all of East Asia, their politics and society are increasingly disparate.

"One China" has been a shibboleth of American diplomacy for a half-century (or longer, if one considers that "territorial integrity of China" that was a mainstay of U.S. China policy in the pre-World War II decades). But it is a shibboleth that has been construed differently in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington. In Beijing, it has always meant that China is sovereign over Taiwan and has the firm right in international law to seize the island by force whenever it is able to amass the capacity to do so. In Taipei, it once justified Chiang Kai-shek's orders to keep the island on a war footing for an ultimate military counterattack against the rebel Communists on the mainland. But it no longer means that. In fact, the words "one China" have been banished from Taipei's diplomatic lexicon since July 1999.

In Washington, the words never meant anything other than that the United States recognizes one government of China at a time. Legally, the United States treats Taiwan as it treats all other "foreign countries, nations, states, governments, or similar entities"¹ for the purposes of domestic law. Militarily, Taiwan has been America's largest market for defense equipment. Diplomatically, however, Taiwan's constitution still mandates that the country's official name is the "Republic of China," and so long as that is the case, the United States cannot recognize it.

Taipei cannot simply resolve the matter by declaring to Beijing, "That's it: You won the civil war, you're China, and we're not," and

¹The Taiwan Relations Act (Public Law 96-8; see Appendix B in this volume), signed by President Carter on April 10, 1979.

then go its peaceful way. This may have been possible in 1971 when Taiwan’s vice foreign minister Yang Hsi-kun explained that Taiwan’s expulsion from the United Nations was an effort by Beijing “to force international recognition of [China’s] right to take over Taiwan as an integral part of China.” Yang secretly asked the U.S. ambassador for American pressure on Chiang Kai-shek to declare Taiwan’s independence under the name of “the Chinese Republic of Taiwan.” Japan’s prime minister, added Yang, had already made such an approach to Chiang Kai-shek, but to no avail.² But the international situation in the intervening decades now restrains Taiwan from moving unilaterally or without broad international approbation.

Nor can Beijing legitimize its use of force against Taiwan by insisting it is a “breakaway” province in open rebellion against the lawful national government.

Nor can Washington solve the matter with a continuous and unthinking repetition of the “one China” mantra, because this risks willful misreading in Beijing. After President George W. Bush’s repeated assurances to Chinese leaders that he “opposed” Taiwanese independence (as if Taiwan were not already independent), Bonnie Glaser, a respected American China scholar, reported that:

Some Chinese even believe that there is sufficient concern in Washington about Chen’s actions and his future agenda that the U.S. may acquiesce in a limited use of force by the PLA—for example, to seize an offshore island, temporarily impose a limited blockade, or fire a lone missile at a military target on Taiwan.³

²See Department of State Telegram 71 Taipei 5869, from the Ambassador in Taipei to the Secretary of State, “Subject: Conversation of Vice Minister Yang Hsi-kun with Ambassador,” November 30, 1971, classified “Secret–Nodis–eyes only for the Secretary and Assistant Secretary Green.”

³Bonnie S. Glaser, “Washington’s Hands-On Approach to Managing Cross-Strait Tension,” PacNet Number 21, Pacific Forum CSIS Honolulu, Hawaii, May 13, 2004, at www.csis.org/pacfor/paco421.pdf.

With the re-election of Taiwan's pro-independence president, Chen Shui-bian, in March 2004, there are two new strategic realities in the Strait. Independence is now a mainstream political sentiment on the island, and China is rapidly building an advanced military force strong enough to destroy Taiwan as a political entity unless Taiwan is assisted by the United States.

America's main challenge in the coming century will be to manage a rising China. The views and opinions expressed in these pages, by scholars and political leaders alike, make a persuasive case that the challenge is made more complex—not easier—by continuing a "one China" policy.